THE GUILD OF ALL SOULS

PRAYER FOR THE DEAD IN THE EARLY CHURCH

BY

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From the President

One of the objects of the Guild of All Souls is to promote the two great doctrines of the Christian Creed: "The Communion of Saints" and "the Resurrection of the Dead". One way of doing this is by producing written material available to Guild members and parishes. Two years ago the Guild agreed to support financially the very important work of Pusey House in Oxford and in return the priests there agreed to produce a substantial paper each year for next five years around these two doctrines. This is the first paper on 'Prayer for the Dead in the Early Church' written by Canon Robin Ward, the present principal of St Stephen's House, Oxford. Although not on the staff, Fr Ward is a member of the Council of Pusey House and until his move to Oxford was Incumbent of the Guild living of St John's Sevenoaks in the Diocese of Rochester. He is also Canon Theologian of Rochester Cathedral.

Father Robin's paper traces the history of intercession for the departed from New Testament times to St Augustine of Hippo in the 5th Century AD. This is important background material for that other object of the Guild, prayer for the departed.

Eventually we hope to make all five papers more widely available by publishing them together in a substantial booklet.

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Prayer for the Dead in the Early Church

Funeral display, numbers of services, expense lavished on burial, the building of costly tombs: all these in a measure afford consolation to the living, but they do not assist the dead. But beyond all doubt the dead are assisted by the prayers of holy Church, and by the saving sacrifice, and by alms, which are bestowed for the good of their souls, that the Lord may deal with them more mercifully than their sins deserve[1].

The biblical foundation

The Church of the Fathers prayed for the departed: her liturgies attest it, her funeral inscriptions call for it, and her theologians teach it. In the course of five centuries only one contrary voice was ever heard, that of Aërius, memorialised among the heretics by Epiphanius. But the explicit origins of the practice are shrouded in obscurity. It is evident that the sort of eschatalogical interest and reflection on the need for individual expiation for sin which we see developing in the book of Daniel[2] transformed Jewish thinking about the departed from the rather vague pre-suppositions of the canonical books of

[1] Augustine, *Hom.* 172.
[2] *Daniel* 9.20, 12.2-3.

the Hebrew Old Testament to the explicit endorsement of sacrificial intercession for the departed found in 2 Maccabees 39-45. The story is familiar: Judas Maccabeus discovers that those of his soldiers who fell in the attack on Adullam (c. 166 BC) had concealed tokens of the idols of Jamnia in their garments: he and his men pray for them *that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out*, and a substantial sum of silver is sent to Jerusalem so that a sin offering can be made on their behalf. As the incident is described, it serves principally to assert belief in the resurrection of the body: *For if [Judas] were not expecting that those who had fallen asleep would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead.* But this text really stands alone in the inter-testamental literature: all we can conclude from it is that it was evidently not considered to be a novelty or fruitless innovation by those who contributed to the collection for the sacrifice to be offered in Jerusalem on behalf of the fallen soldiers.

There is no explicit reference to prayer for the dead in the New Testament, with the controversial possible exception of 2 Timothy 1.16-18, in which Onesiphorus is mentioned in a way which suggests too many commentators that he was dead at the

time of writing. However, the New Testament assumes and clarifies many of the eschatological pre-suppositions necessary to inspire intercession for the departed, which are not so evident in the Old Testament. Most importantly, it is clearly taught that the souls of the departed (including that of Christ himself) are not deprived of all awareness, but are capable of perceiving their circumstances and reacting to them[3]. To this is added a more explicit understanding of personal responsibility for sin, the need for individual repentance and expiation, the manner in which this expiation has an eschatological dimension, and the possibility of substitutionary suffering within the Body of Christ[4]. The key New Testament text here is 1 Corinthians 3.15: *If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*

The place and state of the departed in the Greek Fathers

It is these themes which cohere in the earliest writings that deal with the state of the departed and the aid to be given them by the living, most particularly in reflection on the character of the fire

[3] *Luke* 16.22-3; 1 *Peter* 18-20.
[4] *Matthew* 13.42-3; 25.31-46; *Colossians* 1.24.

of judgement. That the Day of Judgement was to be accomplished with fire was evident to the first Christians from the testimony of Scripture: the text of 1 Corinthians 3.15 appeared to demonstrate that this fire might have a purificatory as well as a penal character. The earliest Christian writers sketch out a tentative eschatological structure in the light of this New Testament evidence: the *Didache* speaks of *all humanity* enduring a *fiery trial* in the last days[5]; Justin Martyr speaks of the souls of the pious in a better place, and the souls of the unjust and wicked in a worse, both waiting for the time of judgement[6]; Irenaeus of the *invisible place allotted to them by God* to which the souls of Christians go to await the resurrection, *of the tribulation ... necessary for those who are saved, that having been ... set on fire, they may be fitted for the royal banquet*, and of *the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome, they are crowned with incorruption*[7]. They by no means teach a formal doctrine of purgatory: what they do teach is that the consequences of sin remain pertinent to the Christian even after he has died, and that those consequences are the subject of the fiery tribulation of the Last Day prior to the resurrection of the dead.

[5] *Didache* 16
[6] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 5.3
[7] Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.31

The first Christian writers to describe a purificatory fire after death are both Egyptians: Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) and Origen (c. 185-c. 254). Clement explicitly teaches that the fire of Tartarus *sanctifies not flesh or sacrifice, but sinful souls – understanding by fire not the all-devouring flame of everyday life but the discerning kind, that pierces through the soul that walks through fire*[8]. The enlightened Christian (whom Clement calls 'gnostic') therefore regards with compassion those who *undergo discipline after death and are brought to repentance against their will by means of* punishment[9]. Because Clement emphasises the corrective character of punishment, and the restoration (*apokatastasis*) which this brings about, he also leaves open the possibility that all intelligent creatures will be saved. This is a theme prominent in the teaching of Origen: the corrective character of the *torments of a good God* are primarily medicinal, and constitute as it were a *baptism of fire* for those not previously cleansed by baptism into the Holy Spirit[10]. This process is purgative, eradicating the

[8] Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 7.6
[9] Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 7.12
[10] Origen *Hom. In Ezek.* 1.13; *Hom.iIn Jer.* 1.3, 2.3; *Hom. in Luc.* 24.

lead from the *natural gold* of the soul[11]. It is also pedagogical : the departed are sent to a *school for souls* during the period intervening between death and the resurrection, where they are initiated into the mystical knowledge necessary for the contemplation of God[12]. Origen is not always consistent in what he says about the interim state between death and the resurrection: in places he teaches that the blessed go directly to be *with Christ*, in others to a version of Hades where the blessed are consoled and the wicked punished in anticipation of the Last Judgement[13]. He is clear however that the departed have knowledge of the living, and that the saints intercede for those still on earth to help purify them from their sins: *the former fathers fight and are involved in the struggle for those who serve under Jesus*[14].

The most prominent fourth century Greek writers reflect the eschatological outlook of Origen even if they do not press his more controversial conclusions. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-86) teaches that the fire which will accompany the Second

[11] Origen, *Hom. in Ex.* 6.4
[12] Origen, *De Principiis* 2.11.6-7
[13] Origen, *Dial. Her.* 23; *De Principiis* 4.3.10
[14] Origen, *Hom. in Jos.* 16.5

Coming will make trial of men (*dokimastikon*), making the works of gold shine brighter and those whose lives are like stubble burn up[15]. The Cappadocian Fathers show little systematic interest in eschatological matters, but S. Gregory of Nazianzus (329-89) mentions the prospect of a *baptism of fire* for the rigorist Novatianists, considers the purgative character of God's fire of judgement in the light of 1 Corinthians 3.12-15, and reflects that the fire cast on earth of Luke 12.49 may be interpreted not simply as vengeful but *in a more merciful view*, as *more worthy of the one who chastises*[16]. Most significant for subsequent Eastern theology is the continuation of Origen's eschatological enterprise by Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-c.395). Gregory teaches that the soul is cleansed by a purgatorial fire: *But while he who for a noble end is attracting the soul to himself, the Fountain of all Blessedness, it is the occasion necessarily to the being so attracted of a state of torture ... while evil is being consumed in the purgatorial fire, the soul that is welded to this evil must inevitably be in the fire too*[17]. The teaching of the Eastern fathers on the state of the

[15] Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat. Or.* 15.21
[16] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 39.19; 3.7; 40.36.
[17] Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima et Resurrectione PG* 46.152A14-B8.

soul after death is speculative and not systematic, but from it certain distinctive themes can be drawn: the significance of purgative fire, derived from 1 Corinthians 3.15; the association of that fire with the Last Judgement, rather than with a specific intermediate state prior to the Resurrection; the possibility that the purgative character of this assize might achieve the redemption of all intelligent creatures through a baptism of fire.

Prayer for the dead in the Eastern Church

The theology of the Eastern fathers may be speculative, but their testimony to the practice of the Church in praying for the dead is not. In the ante-Nicene period the earliest material is to be found in some of the apocryphal writings associated with the New Testament: in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Falconilla, the dead daughter of Queen Tryphaena appears to her mother to ask for the intercession of Thecla, that she might *pass to the abode of the righteous*[18]; in the *Acta Joannis* the practice of celebrating the Eucharist at the tomb of a departed Christian on the third day after death is mentioned[19]. Evidence from Egypt is again particularly strong: the *Testament of Abraham* has a

[18] *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 28
[19] *Acta Joannis* 72

departed soul saved by the intercession of Abraham and S. Michael; Rufinus' Latin translation of Origen's commentary on the letter to the Romans mentions the commemoration of the saints through the *offering* of public prayers[20]; the pseudononymous commentary on Job ascribed to Origen is explicit about the commemoration of the departed at the Eucharist, not simply the *saints* but also *relatives and friends*[21]. The death of the emperor Constantine in 337 afforded the opportunity for a state funeral according to Christian rites for the first time. Eusebius of Caesarea describes the scene in the basilica of the apostles in Constantinople: the clergy *performed the liturgy with prayer*, while the people *shedding tears and wailing aloud, offered up their prayers to God for the soul of the emperor*. To this Eusebius adds a testimony to Constantine's favour with God, in that he was found worthy of such *sacred offices*[22].

Cyril of Jerusalem gives very clear teaching in his Mystagogical Lectures delivered to those newly baptized in Jerusalem in about 347. In the Eucharistic Prayer of the Liturgy, the dead are

[20] Origen, *In Rom.* 9.12
[21] Pseudo-Origen, *Comm. in Job* 3
[22] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini* 71

commemorated after the living: firstly the saints, *that in answer to their prayers and intercessions God would accept our petition;* then *all others from among ourselves who have fallen asleep, for we believe that the greatest benefit will accrue to the souls of those for whom we make our petition in the presence of the holy and awful sacrifice.* Justifying this practice, Cyril states: *we offer up for our sins Christ crucified propitiating the good God both for them and for ourselves*[23]. Gregory of Nazianzus mentions annual commemorations of the departed in his Funeral Sermon for his brother (c. 368), and indeed concludes the oration with a prayer that God will *receive now Caesarius, the first-fruits of our pilgrimage*[24]. At about this time Aërius, a priest of Sebasteia in Pontus, denied the efficacy of prayer for the dead and taught that it discouraged holy living. S. Epiphanius of Salamis devoted a section of his encyclopaedic work against all heresies, the *Panarion*, to refuting Aërius, emphasising the rôle of prayer for the dead in absolving them from the guilt of post-baptismal sin, mentioning also the practice of commemorating the departed by name at public services[25]. John Chrysostom in his writings from his time in

[23] Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Lectures* 5.9,10.
[24] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or. 7 in laud .Caes.* 24
[25] Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 75.7

Antioch (c. 347-407) mentions prayer for the departed as one of the responsibilities of the priesthood, and in several places in his biblical homilies reminds his hearers of the efficacy of the practice and the benefit of giving alms for the departed *in order that the departed may thereby receive comfort*[26]. When he became bishop of Constantinople he continued this theme, in particular emphasising the importance of the Eucharist: *Not in vain was this ordained by the Apostles – that the departed should be commemorated in the awful mysteries … for when … the tremendous sacrifice is offered, we cannot but call upon God and importune him on their behalf*[27]. It was considered noteworthy by the author of the life of Pachomius written at the beginning of the fifth century that this great monastic founder in the Thebaïd did not allow prayers or the Eucharist to be offered at this tomb[28]. The *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* of pseudo-Dionysus gives an explanation of funeral rites as they were celebrated probably in Syria around the year 500: the dead person is commemorated by name and intercession made by the bishop for him, praying

[26] John Chrysostom, *De Sacerdotio* 6.4; *Hom.* 31 *in Matt.*; 41 *in 1 Cor.*.

[27] John Chrysostom, *Hom.* 3 *in Phil.*

[28] *Vita S. Pach.* 65

that his sins due to frailty might be forgiven him, and that he might dwell in the bosom of Abraham[29].

To this evidence from the writings of the fathers in the east is added the testimony of the liturgy and archaeology. Commemoration of the faithful departed in the Eucharistic liturgies is universal: it is present in the Clementine liturgy contained in the *Apostolic Constitutions*; in the Jerusalem liturgy described by S. Cyril; the various liturgies of the Syrian family; in the fourth century Egyptian prayer book of Serapion, together with an invocation for use at the time of burial; in the various Coptic and Nestorian rites; and in the Byzantine liturgies of S. Basil and S. John Chrysostom. The formula given by Serapion is typical: *Sanctify all those who have fallen asleep in the Lord, and number them with all the great and holy ones, and give them a place and mansion in thy kingdom.* The liturgical commemoration of all the departed was often accompanied by the extensive listing of names to be recalled in particular. There is no epigraphic evidence comparable to the inscriptions of the Roman Catacombs to be found among the remains of ancient Eastern Christianity, but there is a lengthy second century epitaph to Avircius, bishop

[29] *De Eccles. Hier.* 7

of Hierapolis in Lesser Phrygia, which concludes *Let every friend that observes this, pray for me.* Egyptian evidence from Nubian graveyards dating from the seventh and eighth centuries provides formulaic requests for the repose of the souls of the departed[30].

The place and state of the departed in the Latin Fathers

Systematic theological reflection on the state of the departed begins in the Latin Church with the pugnacious African lawyer theologian and eventual Montanist heretic Tertullian (c. 160-c. 225). Tertullian was a millenarian who expected the imminent end of the world and who was at pains to defend the material reality of the universal resurrection which would accompany it. However, he allocates to the souls of the departed awaiting this resurrection and judgement a particular place of waiting, or *hospitium*. Here in the bowels of the earth they anticipate *gloom and glory* depending on their ultimate destination: deprived of their bodies, they nevertheless receive a foretaste of what is to come insofar as they are able, *an image of the future*[31].

[30] Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers* 2.1, p. 493
[31] Tertullian, *De Anima* 55-8; *Adv. Marc.* 4.34

Tertullian may well have been responsible for editing the *Passio Perpetuae*, which describes the martyrdom of several Montanist Christians at Carthage in 203. In one of a series of visions of the afterlife described by Perpetua in her prison, her pagan brother Dinocrates who had died as a child is saved from the pains of Hades and brought healing and refreshment through her prayer[32]. This emphasis on the anticipatory character of the pains and joys of the afterlife before the resurrection is also found in Hippolytus, the schismatic bishop of Rome who was martyred in about 235AD. He describes the souls of the reprobate brought to see and smell the lake of fire, whereas the just repose elsewhere with the patriarchs in Abraham's bosom[33]. In contrast to this, S. Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) teaches the immediate admission of all faithful Christians to the Kingdom at death, though with greater rewards for the sufferings of the martyrs, confessors and virgins[34]. He denies the possibility of either repentance or satisfaction after death, although there is passage in his letter to Antonianus which suggests the need for penitential cleansing: *It is one thing, tortured by long suffering for*

[32] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 7-8.
[33] Hippolytus, *Against Plato PG* 10.79.
[34] Cyprian, *Ad Fort.* 13

sins, to be cleansed and long purged by fire; another to have purged all sins by suffering. It is one thing, in fine, to be in suspense till the sentence of God and judgement day; another to be crowned at once by the Lord[35].

The revival of Latin theology in the fourth century in response to the Arian controversy inevitably involved some consideration of eschatological matters. S. Hilary (c. 315-67) considered the departed to sleep in a temporary death until judgement day, although he excluded any possibility of *post-mortem* repentance and thus considered it possible that punishment might begin before the resurrection[36]. S. Ambrose of Milan (c. 334-97) offers no systematic consideration of the question, but brings together various disparate themes, some of which are redolent of Origen, others of a curious blend of neoplatonic and apocalyptic influences. Although in some places he affirms everlasting punishment for the *impii*, elsewhere he emphasises the medicinal character of purgation by fire, and proposes two resurrections: one for those not needing judgement, and the next for those who in the meantime must pass through the fire of 1 Corinthians 3.15, *even if we are not*

[35] Cyprian, *Ep.* 55.20.
[36] Hilary, *In Matt.* 27.4

burned up, still we shall be burned[37]. Elsewhere he proposes that the souls of the departed are confined in storehouses (*animarum promptuaria*), where they either enjoy by anticipation their future reward or condemnation, or simply repose in unconscious suspense until the resurrection[38]. S. Jerome (331-420) is much more emphatic in his writings on the immediate experience of reward and punishment at death: *the saints are not detained in the underworld at all*. However, despite his anti-Origenism, he is prepared to consider the salvation of all believers, even the most sinful, as a consequence of the purging of their works by fire, receiving from the Lord *a moderate sentence, mingled with mercy*[39].

It is S. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) who is the outstanding Latin systematic theologian of Christian eschatology. He establishes in his writings three cardinal points which until his time were not made together with clarity by any other father, and which have come to be the foundation of classic western teaching about the Last Things. Firstly, the departed are judged and go either to salvation or perdition at the time of death: they are

[37] Ambrose, *In Ps. 36* 26
[38] Ambrose, *De Bono Mort.* 10.45-8.
[39] Jerome, *In Eccl.* 9.10; *In Is.* 18.66.24.

not confined in a state of suspense or anticipation until the Last Judgement[40]. Augustine has a forceful doctrine of the importance of the resurrection of the body, but he does not allow it to eclipse this point. Secondly, the fire of 1 *Corinthians* 3.11-15 does not save bad Christians after death by submitting their works to a combustive purgation at the time of the Last Judgement: faith lacking charity is insufficient to save, and the sentence of fire given at the Last Judgement is eternal[41]. Purgative fire is therefore administered to the souls of those whose salvation is assured at death, but who must make expiation for their attachment to earthly goods in the time prior to the Last Judgement[42]. The culpable soul therefore receives after death either purgation by fire or eternal punishment: *vel ignem purgationis, vel poenam aternam*[43]. Augustine is not dogmatic about the character of this fire: what he establishes is its action in the present on those souls needful of purging, and therefore the connection between purgation and intercession for the departed (the ineffectiveness of which for the damned he

[40] Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* 13.8; *De Nat. et Or. Anim.* 2.4.8.
[41] Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* 21. 22, 25.
[42] Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* 21.13, 24; *Enchiridion* 67-8.
[43] Augustine, *De Genesi contra Man.*

emphasises). With the sole exception of John Cassian, Augustine's eschatological teaching becomes the norm in the West: at death the soul is judged and sentenced irrevocably to either heaven or hell; those whose penitence on earth has not expiated the consequences of their non-capital sins do so in the fire of purgatory for as long as is necessary until the Last Judgement. S. Caesarius of Arles (c. 470-542) expresses this clearly in a sermon on 1 *Corinthians* 3.15: *in this fire of passage ... it is not capital sins, but minor sins which will be purified, ... for these sins, as we believe, do not kill the soul, but only disfigure it*[44].

Prayer for the dead in the Latin Church

Although it took Augustine to articulate the elements of the classic western doctrine of purgatory, the practice of prayer for the dead in the Latin church is attested in the writings of theologians, the decrees of councils, the texts of liturgies and the inscriptions on tombs, especially the remarkable testimony of the Roman catacombs. Mention has already been made of intercession for the dead in the *Passio Perpetuae*; Tertullian complements this with further African evidence

[44] Caesarius of Arles, *Hom.* 179.

from around the year 200AD when he describes the practice of annual anniversary offerings for the departed and uses them as an argument against second marriages[45]. S. Cyprian writes with reference to the case of Geminius Victor that there was a law already existing at Carthage that no one who made a priest his executor should have the Eucharist celebrated on his behalf or be named publicly in prayer (*non offeretur pro eo, nec sacrificium pro dormitione eius celebraretur. Neque … meretur nominari in sacerdotum prece*)[46]. Arnobius in about 300AD mentions prayer for the departed among the works carried out in the Christian churches looted by Diocletian[47]. S. Ambrose prays for his brother Satyrus in the funeral sermon he preaches for him (*fraternum munus, sacrificium sacerdotis*); consoles his friend Faustinus on the death of his sister by encouraging prayer rather than lamentation for her; and commends to God the souls of the emperors Gratian, Valentinian and Theodosius in state funeral orations preached on their behalf (*Da requiem perfectam servo tuo Theodosio, requiem illam,*

[45] Tertullian, *De Corona Militis* 3; *De Exhortatione Castitatis* 11
[46] Cyprian, *Ep.* 66.
[47] Arnobius, *Adversus Gentes* 4.36.

quam praeparasti sanctis tuis)[48]. S. Jerome consoles his friend Pammachius on the death of his wife by encouraging charity: *Just as water extinguishes fire, so almsgiving effaces sin*[49].

However, it is Augustine who gives the most fulsome evidence for the practice of praying for the dead. In the *Confessions* it is the death of his mother Monica which provides the occasion for him to describe how the *sacrifice of our redemption was offered for her* at her funeral; subsequently he asks his readers to pray for her, and recalls that she desired no funeral monument, simply a daily commemoration at the altar[50]. In the *Enchiridion* he deals specifically with the utility of prayer for the dead and makes an important distinction between those for whom it is offered: for the good it is by way of thanksgiving, for the *not very wicked* an atonement, for the wicked no benefit to them but a consolation to the living, concluding *And where they avail, they have the effect of either making the pardon perfect or at least of making the condemnation easier to*

[48] Ambrose, *De Excessu Satyri* 1.80; *Ep.* 39.4; *De Ob. Valentin.* 80; *De Ob. Theod.* 36.
[49] Jerome, *Ep.* 66.5
[50] Augustine, *Confessions* 9.12,13

bear[51]. His tract *De cura gerenda pro mortuis*, written in response to S. Paulinus of Nola in about 421AD who had asked about the common Latin practice of being buried near to martyrs, Augustine emphasises the benefit of prayer for the dead even when individual names are not mentioned, rather than burial in sacred places. He acknowledges that to pray for all the dead is inevitably superfluous, but declares that it is better to do so rather than deprive anyone of benefit. In dealing with the perceived lack of scriptural warrant for the practice Augustine mentions 2 Maccabees 12.32, and furthermore declares that the tradition of the church in reserving an opportunity for intercession for the departed in the Eucharistic prayer supplies any deficiency in the scriptural authority[52].

Various conciliar decrees illustrate the regulation of public intercession for the departed. Non-fasting clergy are prohibited from celebrating the Eucharist at funerals; penitents who die before the end of their exclusion from the Eucharist are allowed public commemoration; suicides are excluded from prayer; alms offered for the dead are protected; priests are prevented from celebrating Masses for

[51] Augustine, *Enchiridion* 110
[52] Augustine, *De Cura* 4.6, 18.22.

the dead in order to kill the living[53]. Ample provision for the commemoration of the dead is made in all the liturgies of the western churches which survive: the Roman Canon prays that the departed might enjoy *refreshment, light and peace*, and the Ambrosian rite does so in similar terms, both placing the *Memento* after the consecration and before the communion of the priest. In addition, the Gelasian sacramentary containing Roman liturgical forms of the eighth century contains no fewer than fourteen propers to be used in Masses for the dead. Both the Mozarabic and Gallican rites offer a great variety of different formulae to the same end. The Roman catacombs are furnished with a rich collection of funerary inscriptions from the first century to the fall of the City to Alaric the Goth in 410AD. Many of these are addressed not directly to God but to the person commemorated, but they wish peace, refreshment, life in God's glory and with the angels.

The Patristic Inheritance

It is evident that the patristic church prayed for the departed, and that the practice was recorded in Christian literature, preserved in liturgies and

[53] *Vide* Michel *DTC* 'Purgatoire' cc. 1233-5.

inscriptions and encouraged by the teaching of the most prominent fathers. This prayer was particularly associated with the Eucharist: anniversary celebrations and the naming of individual departed Christians in public prayer are well attested, as well as more general commendations for all the faithful who had died. However, the theological reasons given to justify the practice and the eschatological contexts proposed are much more complex. Certain themes are well established: that there was a distinction to be made between the reward of outstanding Christians such as the martyrs, and those whose profession of faith was compromised by the quotidian taint of post-baptismal sin; that there would be a medicinal purging of those in the latter category, according to the teaching of 1 Corinthians 3.11-15; that between death and the general resurrection the souls of the departed might in some way experience by way of anticipation their ultimate fate, whether reward or punishment. However, until the contribution of S. Augustine, it was generally considered that the purgative fire took effect at the Last Judgement and not before: the consequence of this was to suggest the incomplete character of whatever sensation the souls of departed Christians enjoyed, and

furthermore to posit a possibility that all intelligent creatures would be restored and saved. The baptized but sinful dead are therefore in a state of continuing probation, and intercession for them plays its part in securing the actual forgiveness of sin in order that they might be saved at the Last Judgement. This remains a significant theme in the eschatology of the Orthodox churches, as the contemporary controversy over the doctrine of spiritual toll-houses in which the souls of the dead are supposedly weighed and tested bears out[54].

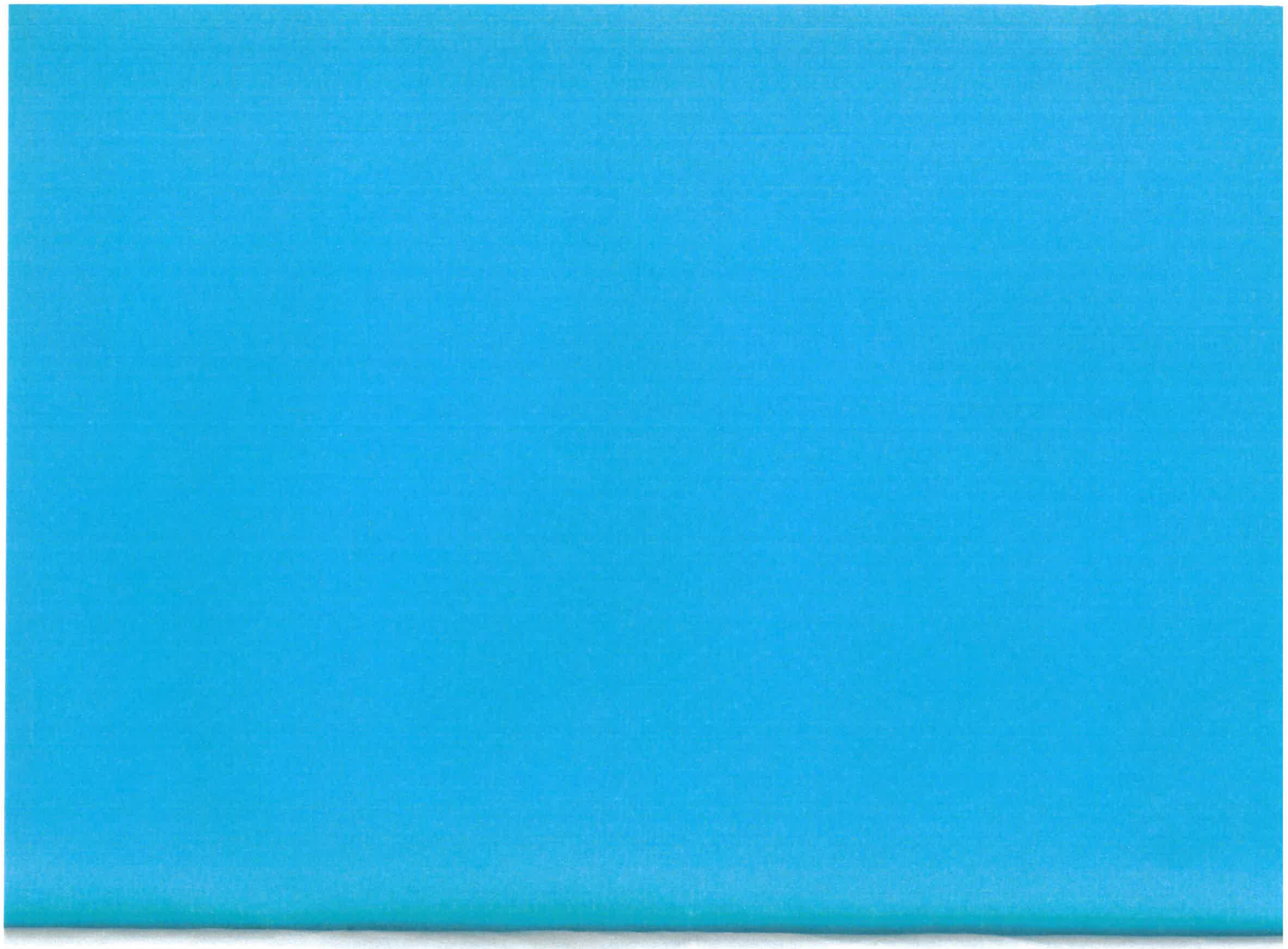
It is S. Augustine who makes the decisive and original contribution to Latin eschatology when he places the particular judgement of each soul emphatically at the point of death, excludes any possibility of ameliorating or altering that judgement in the future, brings the purgatorial fire forward to before the Last Judgement, and defines it as an expiatory chastisement for unforgiven venial sin. This naturally renders much of the prayer offered for the departed redundant, as it cannot help the reprobate or enhance the felicity of the blessed: he is frank in acknowledging this, and justifies the redundancy as a consolation to the living only. Augustine's three-tier afterlife rapidly

[54] See especially the works of Fr Seraphim Rose.

established itself as the scaffolding whereby the speculative structure of medieval purgatory was raised. Already in Gregory the Great, we see customs such as the trental of masses offered for the departed: a particular tariff efficacious for releasing a soul in purgatory at once[55]. Because of the common practice of praying for the dead in both East and West, the degree to which Latin and Greek eschatology had diverged since Augustine did not become apparent until the conciliar attempts at reunion began in earnest in the fourteenth century. Augustine's legacy as the father of purgatory is thus a contentious one: his teaching is the foundation on which Dante raises the awesome edifice of the *Divine Comedy*, and the original of the *fond thing, vainly invented* which provoked the English to cut themselves off from their dead for four centuries. But we see in Augustine not only the theologian who imposes order and rigour on the waywardness of patristic eschatology: we see the witness to a Christian piety which was already old when he wrote, and which naturally and charitably embraced the dead and presented them with the living at the altar of God.

[55] Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 4.

For this has been handed down by the fathers, and is observed by the whole church, that prayer should be made for those who have died in the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ, when they are commemorated at the sacrifice in their own place, and that it should be mentioned that the sacrifice is offered for them[56].

Robin Ward
S. John Damascene, 2005

[56] Augustine, *Hom.* 172.